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Minutes

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COVID-19 STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Covid-19 Strategy Committee
held by video conference on

THURSDAY 16th July 2020
At 1430 PM

P R E S E N T

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
First Secretary of State, and Secretary of State for
Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Minister for
the Cabinet Office

The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

The Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and
Industrial Strategy, Minister for COP26

ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports

The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP
Secretary of State for Transport

Professor Chris Whitty CB
Chief Medical Officer for England and the UK

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Simon Case CVO
Permanent Secretary at No 10 Downing Street

Tom Shinner
Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister

Secretariat

Sir Mark Sedwill

NR

E Payne

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COVID-19 Strategy:
Roadmap Next Steps

The PRIME MINISTER said that the roadmap that had been published in May had set out a plan. The 4 July step had been stretching but had largely been delivered. Many businesses had opened in a Covid-secure way. There were signs that the virus was under control: the number of deaths and hospital admissions with Covid-19 (coronavirus) were trending down, and overall incidence was flattish. There were some local and regional hotspots where particular measures had been put in place. The plan in the previous roadmap had expired; a new set of dates should set out when the remaining businesses would reopen and restrictions would lift. He intended to set this out the following day.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the fundamental choice before the Committee was whether to say publicly that there was a date by which the Government hoped that all restrictions would be lifted, subject to caveats. Some would argue that November, as suggested in the paper before the Committee, would be too early to aspire to such a return to normality. But those who argued this should set out when the alternative date would be, as it was not obvious what would have changed should the Government aim to lift the restrictions by the following spring; there would still be a huge number of people who had not had coronavirus and the damage caused to the economy would have increased.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the central objective was to get life back to as close to normal as possible with the country as Covid-secure as possible before Christmas. Businesses relied on Christmas trading to survive. If the economy was kept in the deep freeze it would suffer significant damage. Shops in the centre of London were struggling. Should nothing be done, there would be millions of people unemployed. The Government should set out an ambition to allow closed businesses, or those which could not operate under social distancing measures, to open. But it should be subject to a caveat: measure would only be

relaxed if the virus was under control. Businesses needed a timetable to give them the confidence to keep people employed. The Committee needed to address the question of whether the risk of a winter surge and a second peak of coronavirus, combined with a winter influenza outbreak and other winter pressures was so great that the Government should not aspire to opening everything up by the end of the year.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that the decisions in front of the Committee were judgements for Ministers. The balance could be illustrated by using a metaphor of weighing scales: the virus on one side and counter-measures on the other, with the tipping point whereby 'R' (the rate of reproduction) was equal to one. At present, 'R' in the UK was estimated to be between 0.7 and 0.9. Reopening more businesses would favour the virus, with the risk that once the tipping point had been reached, a wider range of businesses would have to close to counter this. There were however a growing range of tools to act as counter-measures, including the Test and Trace programme and face coverings. There were two significant risk moments. The first was the return of schools in September. This would increase the risk but it was unclear by how much. The second was the winter. Winter would benefit the virus but the question was by how much. All respiratory viruses were exacerbated by the winter, and this also combined with the influenza season and the tendency for people to gather indoors more. Lifting measures and restrictions in November would increase risks. Once the winter had ended, weights would be taken off the virus' side of the weighing scales and it would be a safer moment to take risks. Planning for there to be a vaccine or treatment for coronavirus by Christmas would be unrealistic; given the amount of energy being put into development, it was highly likely that there would be one by Christmas 2021.

In discussion the following points were made:

- a. setting out a new roadmap and announcing a date by which Britain could be moving again was the right thing to do and would give businesses hope, even if it risked failure. The dates should be caveated and conditional as they had been throughout;
- b. business owners were looking for a clear roadmap. If they did not have it soon, they would start letting people go or would shut down. Christmas stock would need to be ordered soon so certainty was required. Some retailers would switch to an online model if social distancing restrictions remained. Retailers in Central London needed commuters to come back, international tourists and the reopening of the West End's entertainment venues;
- c. there were many excellent measures that could be relied on to enable a full reopening in November: large testing capacity, a working mobile phone app, backward contact tracing, and effective local lockdowns. There would also be further developments. Given that, setting a date of November in a roadmap could be met. It would give people hope;
- d. social distancing was becoming ingrained in people's behaviour. Face coverings were becoming a norm and could be maintained in some settings.
- e. it was hard to underestimate the economic harm that coronavirus had caused: the damage was catastrophic. Millions and millions of people were going to lose their jobs and the impact on the public finances was catastrophic: the Government was spending tens of billions of pounds that it did not have. Government needed to have its eyes wide open about the shocking impact and the real life consequences. Those who would be most affected were disproportionately young, ethnic minorities, women and lower paid. It was easy to err on the side of caution but there would

- be costs to doing that and the impacts would be felt day after day and week after week;
- f. the economic situation could be even worse if prevalence of the virus increased in the coming months. There was a risk that by over-promising, the UK would be in a worse position. There was no obligation to make a commitment to aim to go back to normal in November. It would be great if it were possible, but there was a high likelihood that the Government would be obliged to make a u-turn. Experience showed that the public would not hear caveats in the messaging. A decision should only be made at the end of September as the situation would be much clearer by then: schools would have been reopened. It needed to be as easy as possible to protect the NHS over the winter;
 - g. there were questions which remained. It was not clear whether the virus was becoming less lethal as per some reports, nor whether the virus had become more manageable as a result of treatments. It would be key to understand how resilient the NHS would be that winter, and what more could be done to refine the segmentation approach to shielding. It might be possible to bring forward influenza vaccinations to help the NHS' winter resilience;
 - h. decisions of this magnitude should be made on the basis of more evidence. Statistics were required. People wanted detail not high level narratives. It was unclear which sectors were due to benefit from the proposals. The retail sector in the high street was already in decline. The Government should not save businesses that would be gone or totally transformed in two or three years time anyway;
 - i. a lesson to learn from previous announcements was that clarity of communication, and subsequent behaviour from Ministers and others, was crucial to ensuring compliance. More communications,

- including social media, should be provided to empower the public and give them confidence to get back out and to advise them on how to be safe;
- j. good progress was being made by the Oxford vaccine trial and the vaccine taskforce, but that could not be relied on;
 - k. the relaxation of measures on 1 August should be looked at again. They were significant and could put at risk the delivery of the the Government's priority objective to open schools fully in September;
 - l. beauticians were a key sector of the economy and a clear plan for allowing them to open and offer a full range of services should be set out in the roadmap; and
 - m. remarkable progress had been made since the five tests had been set out earlier that year.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that the virus was not mutating enough to make a difference. In some ways it was now easier to transmit. It was no less virulent. Mortality rates were going down as medical knowledge on how to manage the virus was improving, but not for the most elderly who were at the most risk. Some segmentation was already occurring given the way that different groups of people were behaving, with the oldest most likely to act with greater caution, but greater segmentation could not be relied on, as it would be highly improbable that the virus could be prevented from spreading between groups. It was unlikely that the virus would ever be eliminated, it was too strong. There were biological reasons why winter would present a higher risk. The NHS was likely to be able to cope with coronavirus unless the UK saw a severe increase in cases. But there was a balance to be struck as there had been a reduction in the treatment of non-coronavirus related health issues, such as cancer. It was not possible to be optimistic about returning to normal by Christmas that year, but it was possible to be optimistic on a one to two year time horizon.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that compared to when coronavirus first arrived in the UK, there were more tools that could be used to suppress the virus including: track and trace, segmentation and shielding and local lockdowns. The NHS had done brilliantly throughout the crisis and the Government must ensure that it was properly funded for the winter.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that it was incumbent on the Government to set out an ambition for when it wanted the country to get back to business as usual. If the Government were to wait for a vaccine or treatment before returning to normality it may be 20 years, and this would lead to parts of the economy disappearing. A single set of rules that everyone needed to follow was unviable commercially. If in autumn 'R' remained around one with local outbreaks swiftly addressed, it should be possible to lift social distancing measures. This would mean enabling people to sit next to each other on public transport or in theatres and do business normally in shops. Social distancing rules made it impossible for businesses to operate. The social distancing restrictions were having a significant real-world impact and millions would be unemployed. Other countries such as Denmark were allowing businesses including retail and hospitality to trade again.

Concluding, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the key question was whether to set an ambition and aspiration of getting things back to that state before Christmas rather than waiting until the spring. His view was that there was a sufficient arsenal of countermeasures to seek to contain the virus, and that the Government should set out as much of a timetable as it could. He would think carefully about how to express the conditionality attached to the November date, reflecting on what the Committee had said.

